TIIAP FY 1999
Project Narrative

Providence Plan

Grant # 44-60-99019
Community Networking
Providence, Rhode Island

TIIAP GRANT APPLICATION
COZ COLLABORATIVE

Executive Summary

This project is intended for the "Community Networking" primary application area and cuts across the "Public Services" and "Education, Culture, and Lifelong Learning" application areas.

The Providence Plan, partnering with the Community Opportunity Zone (COZ) Collaborative including the Providence Public Library, Providence School Department, and service providers within Providence's Enterprise Community (EC), proposes a Community Opportunity Zone Information Network (COZIN). The COZ Collaborative is developing a comprehensive system for delivering services to residents of the West End/Elmwood neighborhood. The COZIN will enable service providers, schools, and libraries to access and share information about services offered by collaborative members and outside agencies, thereby streamlining service delivery to collaborating agency clients.

The COZIN will feature an integrated database containing information about services of the partners; information on health, education and social services; and community information, including neighborhood demographics and economic conditions. This information will be distributed via an Internet-based network and will be accessed through a graphical interface that will enable users to produce maps of geographically-based information at the click of a button. Through the COZIN, residents will receive accurate and timely information to assist them in meeting their needs. Information will be accessible to the ten partnering organization staffs, as well as to the general public at five COZ provider sites, three schools, the local branch library, and any other computer with Internet access. An evaluator will collect and analyze information to assess the uses, outcomes and impact of the COZIN. After the first year of operation, the COZIN will expand to two additional EC neighborhoods.

PROJECT DEFINITION

The Problem. The Providence Enterprise Community (EC) is comprised of the most distressed, underserved neighborhoods in the city. The numerous educational, health, employment, and other social needs facing EC residents are compounded by the lack of an integrated service delivery system and a lack of shared information about these services. The many community-based organizations offering services within the EC do not integrate their services with other providers to comprehensively address the full range of residents' needs. As a result, necessary referrals are not always made. Residents must track down the services they need, or their service needs simply go unmet. Furthermore, service providers often do not have sufficient information about the communities in which they operate and the populations they intend to serve, so they are unable to adequately plan their services. Individuals and service providers need information that will enable services to be delivered more effectively, efficiently, and comprehensively.

The Solution. In partnership with the Providence School Department, the Providence Public Library, and community-based service providers, The Providence Plan is proposing to link neighborhood schools, service providers, and branch libraries via information and Web-based information technology. This information network will enable these individual community institutions to serve their common constituents more effectively as a whole. A pilot project will be launched in the West End / Elmwood community, where a "Community Opportunity Zone" (COZ) Collaborative has already been established to integrate education, health, human, and neighborhood services (see Appendix E). After the first year, the network will expand to two other communities and eventually form a citywide network.[1]

The COZ Collaborative recognized early in their planning process that they could not successfully integrate their services without access to the proper information and without the tools to share that information and communicate with one another. The proposed solution to these service and information needs is the Web-based Community Opportunity Zone Information Network (COZIN). The COZIN will consist of several modular components, including: a "*services module*" featuring information on services and providers within the EC and beyond; a *"planning module"* featuring demographic and community profiles needed to plan for the service needs of constituents and prepare funding proposals; a *"communication module"* enabling collaborating agencies to communicate with one another and individual end users to contact service providers; a *"reference module"* featuring information about issues and organizations that are relevant to the topics of education, health, and human services; and a *"mapping module"* employing Web-based GIS (geographic information systems) server technology to enable end users to generate maps that put information in a geographic context (e.g., the location of child care providers near a resident's neighborhood or potential employer).

The COZIN will be available to service providers through equipment and Internet access provided by this grant. The information network, and training on how to use it, will also be available to the broader community through school Family Centers, branch libraries, and the

---

[1] The communities and schools selected for this project coincide with those collaborating on the "Renaissance Centers" project recently funded through the 21st Century Learning Center program. This was a deliberate choice, to maximize the value of the school-community partnerships that had already been established, and based on the common goals of meeting the social and neighborhood service needs of the community.

community-based service providers that have an education and training component to the services they provide. In addition, anyone with Internet access will be able to access the COZIN.

Outcomes. The information and communication tools that the COZIN will provide will result in a more effective, integrated delivery of education, health, and social services to EC residents. The partners in the COZ Collaborative are confident that the integration of services enabled through the COZIN will reduce the obstacles facing many EC residents and lead to increased levels of employment and income, increased school readiness, and improved quality of life. These broad effects will result from other direct outcomes of the COZIN that can be evaluated. The COZIN will enable service providers to perform their jobs more efficiently and thoroughly, as they will have direct access to information that is relevant to the issues facing their clients, and to information that will enable them to make appropriate referrals to other providers. Increased collaboration will effectively stretch the resources available to providers by giving them direct access to the expertise of other professionals and by avoiding duplication of effort. The COZIN will also result in better planning of services provided to clients by enhancing providers' knowledge of their client base with additional community profile information. Furthermore, information available through the COZIN will add value to school curricula and library reference resources.

Individuals and families will benefit from the COZIN, as it will provide them with more direct access to the full range of services they require. By providing residents with a single point of access to address multiple needs, we will reduce the need to make several phone calls or trips to track down available services. This is vital when dealing with a population with limited English language skills and low automobile ownership. Also, by making information available at public access points and providing training on how to access the information, residents will increase their independence in meeting their own needs.

EVALUATION

The evaluation plan for the project includes the use of staff from the partner organizations, as well as an experienced evaluator of educational and human service programs, to collect and analyze information that will be used to assess the effectiveness of the COZIN in improving the delivery of a comprehensive range of services.

Evaluation Questions. The evaluation process will address a range of questions that seek to determine whether project goals are being met both for service providers and their beneficiaries. These questions will assess a wide range of topics, such as: the usability and usefulness of the COZIN at the agency and individual end-user levels; whether the COZIN facilitates collaboration among providers; whether service providers are able to deliver services more effectively and efficiently; and whether the COZIN enables beneficiaries to access these services more efficiently. The evaluator will also work with project staff to determine whether lessons learned are used to improve the effectiveness of the project. A more extensive list of potential questions is included in Appendix H.

Evaluation Strategy, Data Collection, and Data Analysis. A variety of methods – including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and evaluation of documented project activity – will be employed to gather information that will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the project from

the perspective of service provider staff, project staff, and individual end-users. Project staff will evaluate the design and implementation plans by soliciting feedback from potential end-users. Surveys of community residents, including a pre-program "baseline" survey, will be used to measure changes in use patterns and knowledge relating to service availability. The use of, and satisfaction with, the COZIN will be evaluated through periodic surveys, on-line questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions with end-users, with particular attention paid to usability of the interface and usefulness of the content. Training sessions will be evaluated via written evaluation forms. Furthermore, local educators and service providers in the partner agencies will maintain and forward records on the number and type of clients who seek their services or are referred to other services as a result of accessing the COZIN network. The evaluation consultant will produce semi-annual written reports that document the progress of the project; an assessment of the technology and its effectiveness; lessons learned; and recommendations for improving the system's effectiveness, efficiency, usability, management, and implementation.

The data will be analyzed to produce a series of qualitative and quantitative measures of the project's implementation and its impacts. Tools used for the analysis include an organizational diagram of the network; data flow diagrams for representative end users; descriptive statistical analyses of various end-user traits and utilization patterns; qualitative assessment of project implementation; and extrapolation from reporting partner agency data of the number of end users during each year of the project. Details are provided in Appendix H.

Budgeting of Resources and Staffing for Evaluation. A consultant will be hired to design and implement the evaluation strategy. In addition, some monitoring and data collection and reporting activities will be carried out by project and partner staff. The evaluation consultant, Dr. Mark T. Motte, has a Ph.D. in Urban Planning and Policy Development and thirteen years' experience in the field of educational and human service program evaluation (Dr. Motte's resumé is provided in Appendix I). The consultant is accounted for in the budget at a rate of $50 per hour, for a total annual budget of up to $12,000 for each of three years. In addition, the work plans for project staff (project manager and technical staff) and partner staff include 1-2 hours per week to collect and document the evaluation-related information described above. This staff time is accounted for in the attached Budget Narrative.

SIGNIFICANCE

Innovation. The proposed Community Opportunity Zone Information Network (COZIN) is a network of information as well as a network of community-based agencies, institutions, and individuals. It offers innovative applications of information technology within the human services arena, as well as innovative partnerships to ensure that services are delivered effectively, efficiently, and comprehensively to residents of the Providence Enterprise Community.

The project will employ cable modem technology to give service providers, schools, libraries, and individuals high-speed permanent access to the COZIN Web site, thereby giving them the ability to communicate with one another and to access information that will facilitate planning, coordination, and access to services. The COZIN database will cut across a range of issues and applications to facilitate the delivery of services in a coordinated, integrated manner. Its modular nature enables the project to be phased in and to serve a variety of end users' information needs.

The COZIN encompasses aspects of other TIIAP-funded projects, but stands apart as a locally focused, collaborative-driven, multi-purpose, multi-module information and communication tool. Like the INFO-LINE of Los Angeles, the COZIN will improve the delivery of services by providing information about and access to available services. Like the San Francisco Early Childhood Information System Project, the COZIN will serve as an information clearinghouse, facilitate collaboration, and provide access to demographic data that will facilitate planning of services. The COZIN will expand the application of information technology by combining aspects of each of these two projects and adding its own unique components.

The COZ collaboratives are innovative in that they bring together neighborhood-based service providers; the city's school department and individual neighborhood schools; the public library system and its neighborhood branch libraries; and citywide non-profits that provide links to resources that exist outside the neighborhood. The COZIN will cut across service categories and will serve a variety of end users and beneficiaries with a variety of information needs.

COZIN as a Model Project. The proposed COZIN project has several attributes that enable it to serve as a useful model for other low-income urban communities. First, it will demonstrate how new partnerships can address critical issues, such as unemployment and illiteracy, that are prevalent in other low-income communities. The driving force behind the COZIN project is the strong partnership of local service providers, schools, libraries, other non-profits, and business – the types of partners that can be found in communities everywhere. This model will demonstrate how these partners can use a network of information to integrate the services they provide to address the full range of service needs within a community.

Second, the COZIN will employ data and technology that is available in other communities. Most of the content of the database will draw from administrative data available from service providers and public sector departments. The information network's interface will utilize conventional Web technology and HTML language. Our COZIN model will utilize cable-based Internet access technology, but the concept could be applied via more common dial-up access.

Third, the modular nature of the project's database and interface will enable other communities to select and adapt aspects that are appropriate for their local circumstances, and to develop it at a scale that is within their means. Finally, the COZIN will demonstrate the adaptability of the solution by beginning in one neighborhood and applying it to two other neighborhoods over the three-year grant period. The project also demonstrates operability at a larger scale as it includes citywide organizational relationships and incorporates city- and statewide information.

PROJECT FEASIBILITY

Technical approach. The COZIN will utilize a variety of database and Internet technologies. Databases will reside on a World Wide Web server co-located at an Internet service provider. Each partner organization will receive a personal computer and Internet access via cable modem.

The COZIN will consist of a Web site containing five modules (see page 1) that organize the databases by functional usage and that provide the path to accessing the information. All

databases will be constructed in Microsoft Access format. The interfaces to each module will be designed utilizing Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and Active Server Pages (ASP), such that end-users will be able to request specific information they would like to view rather than being forced to wade through irrelevant static pages of information. The COZIN will also employ a GIS (geographic information system) map server to enable users to enter an address or geographic area and receive information relevant to that location. This approach enables users to access the GIS software via a Web browser so that no additional software is required at each site.

Interoperability will be maximized by the development of all interfaces and information modules in a Web environment. Web applications are platform-independent and are therefore the epitome of interoperability; i.e., regardless of the computer manufacturer or operating system, the Internet browser maintains responsibility for interpreting the data. Furthermore, given that the project will employ conventional industry-standard Web browser software, it offers a great degree of flexibility in terms of programming applications.

Technical alternatives have been chosen to maximize the existing knowledge base and the existing technological infrastructure. By creating the COZIN as a Web-based application, we have significantly reduced the learning curve to use the software application interface. If the end-user is familiar with a Web browser, the tool will be relatively easy to use, and if the end-user has not had experience with Web browsers, a simple training regimen can be prescribed.

Few of our project partner organizations currently have access to the Internet. Those that do have access use a modem and dial-up account; this process is slow, inefficient, and costly. To address this challenge, and to facilitate transmission of large data and graphics (maps) files, we plan to utilize the newly developing cable-based access technology. Cable-based access is both fast and cheap compared to ISDN and T1 technologies.

Scalability barriers will be overcome by designing the program so that the server is co-located at an Internet service provider. As usage of the site increases beyond the initial capabilities of the 384 kilobytes per second of bandwidth provided by the Symmetrical Digital Subscriber Line, additional bandwidth up to 10 megabits can be added without additional hardware requirements. Since the design of this system will be modular, adding new information as the COZIN expands will be a simple matter of adding new databases. When new modules are needed or requested, they can be developed and tested independently of the COZIN and then added to the system.

Maintaining the system will be a minimal challenge, because the actual infrastructure of the COZIN will be the responsibility of our Internet access provider. Since providers must remain competitive, by renegotiating contracts or seeking competitive bids on a regular basis we will capitalize on competition among service providers to help keep costs down and service current.

Applicant Qualifications. In conjunction with our community and institutional partners, we believe that we have assembled a strong project team with the requisite qualifications to successfully implement the COZIN. Since its formation in 1992, The Providence Plan has established a track record of building broad community coalitions and taking a proactive, data-driven role on issues of citywide importance. The policy, planning, and technical expertise of The Providence Plan are supplemented by the resources available to us through our partnerships

with community organizations, academic institutions, and other city, state, and national organizations. For further details on the qualifications of the applicant team, please see Appendices B through E.

Budget, Implementation Schedule, and Timeline. Because The Providence Plan and the Providence Public Library are involved with a number of information, data distribution, and GIS-related issues, some of the work to develop the COZIN is already in progress. A TIIAP grant would provide us with the financial resources to fully implement our efforts. The hiring of a full-time project team in late 1999 to begin implementing the map server and compiling the data for conversion to a Web format would initiate the full-fledged COZIN. Work with GIS consultants/experts and a Web hosting provider would begin as soon as the first data sets are completed. The COZIN Web site would be functional by April 2000. Please see our Budget Narrative for further details regarding our budget proposal, and see Appendix G for our complete project timeline.

Sustainability. The original project partners will remain closely involved in the project. Community-based service providers will continue to provide information about their services, support their constituents' training needs, and evaluate the effectiveness of the network. The Providence Plan will continue to contribute a portion of the staff it devotes to related Enterprise Community and data-driven initiatives. The library will continue to provide staff time for staff training and end-user support in the libraries, and the School Department will continue to contribute system-wide data and school-level staff support. While these in-kind contributions to the project will remain in place, funds will be needed for Internet access[2], evaluation, public training sessions, database and interface management, and overall project management. As project partners reap the benefits of the COZIN, they will be likely to contribute portions of their own organizational budgets and help raise additional funds to support the project.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The Providence Plan is committed to partnering with community-based organizations, as well as the private and public sectors, to improve the lives of Providence residents, particularly those in the Enterprise Community (EC) who have the highest needs and are the most underserved.[3] Our extensive community outreach included a neighborhood-based strategic planning process in August 1998 that featured four weekly meetings in each of the EC's three neighborhoods. Participants in that process identified access to information and improved communication as essential for residents, community-based organizations, and other institutions and stakeholders to work together to rebuild urban communities.

In seeking partners for this initiative, we involved institutional as well as community-based stakeholders who are committed to using information to empower the community. We approached the Providence Public Library, which is in the business of providing information to

---

[2] As of the time this proposal was being written, the project team was still negotiating with the local cable company to provide discounted or fully donated Internet access. Pending the outcome of those discussions, the full cost of access is included in the budget.

[3] The Providence Plan is the fiscal and coordinating agent for the Providence Enterprise Community (EC). See Appendix J for further details on the EC.

the community; the Providence School Department, which is in the business of educating children and, increasingly, involving parents and the broader community; and the West End/Elmwood COZ Collaborative, which is working to develop an integrated system for delivering vital services and information to residents. Each of these partners identified the need for better information to meet their organizational needs and the needs of their constituents. Each responded enthusiastically to this proposal and affirmed their financial support and roles as partners (see Appendix A for letters of support and Appendices B through E for a description of partnering organizations).

The end-users of the COZIN will include both community-based organizations and residents. When designing this project, we needed to consider the varying levels of support that will be required by both types of end-users. We held frequent meetings with our project partners to determine how the COZIN would address: the community's information needs; the equipment and technical assistance needs of the partnering organizations; the role that each organization would play in this partnership; and the barriers that might prohibit residents from utilizing the network as end users. For example, we learned that some community members have an aversion to institutional settings and might not use the library for access or training. Therefore, our strategy utilizes a combination of libraries, school Family Centers, and community-based organizations. In addition, we will include end-users in the evaluation of the interface design to ensure its usability. The community-based meetings have helped us shape a proposal that addresses issues and concerns important to the end-users of this project.

Privacy of the beneficiaries of this initiative was a major concern to the partnering organizations. It was decided that no confidential or individually identifiable information about project beneficiaries will be included as part of the COZIN database. Additionally, any external data sets with sensitive information (e.g., welfare caseloads) will be presented only in aggregate form.

REDUCING DISPARITIES

The COZIN primarily will target residents of the Enterprise Community (EC), which includes some of the most distressed neighborhoods in Providence. While one in three city residents live within the borders of the EC, the area includes a disproportionate number of residents in need. For example, 55% of all Providence families living below poverty reside in the EC. Please refer to Appendix J for a description of the characteristics of the EC.

EC residents are not learning the technological skills needed in today's economy. They are unlikely to have a home computer with on-line service to access information.   According to a recent Commerce Department report, "Falling Through the Net II: New Data on the Digital Divide," only 17.5% of urban households with income levels comparable to the EC median income level have computers. Further, only 7.8% of these households have on-line service.

The COZIN will narrow the "digital divide" by providing residents with access to accurate and timely information about their community. However, making the COZIN available is only part of the challenge, given the residents' limited exposure to computers and the Internet, limited literacy and English language skills, and hesitancy to access institutional services. The involvement of our community-based partners – organizations with trust and credibility among

residents – is vital to ensure adequate outreach and to encourage residents' use of the COZIN. In addition to the access and training resources available through the Providence Public Library, we will strategically locate computers in school-based family resource centers and community organizations. Organization staffs will be trained on how to access this tool in order to meet clients' needs and market the resource to residents. One partner, The Genesis Center, will incorporate the training of residents into its adult education curriculum.

DOCUMENTATION AND DISSEMINATION

Documentation. The COZIN will serve as a model that can be replicated in other cities throughout the country. We will hire a documentor and videographer to complete a range of documentation activities. In addition, we will build documentation into the work plans of all project staff and partner staff to ensure that it is ongoing and comprehensive.

Our documentation plan will yield the following products: two documentor's reports (an interim report at the end of Year 1 and a final report at the end of Year 3); videotapes of training sessions; a videotape tracking the development and implementation of the project; and an electronic archive of documentation available on the COZIN Web site.

These expected products will guide the work of the documentor and videographer. Working in conjunction with the evaluator, the documentor will interview project partners to determine expectations of the COZIN and to track progress and outcomes; interview community users to assess the variety of uses of the COZIN; provide a detailed account of project meetings; compile training curriculum and materials; provide an account of public activities relating to the COZIN; and prepare project reports. The videographer will videotape selected meetings, events, and interviews relating to the COZIN; videotape training sessions and other community activities relating to the COZIN; and provide video footage of the COZIN for use as a presentation and dissemination tool.

Dissemination Plan. Relying heavily on our evaluation and documentation work, our dissemination plan will be two-pronged: local and national. At the local level, we will disseminate reports and other documentation about the COZIN to the other neighborhoods with which we plan to partner as we expand the COZIN. Library and school staff at pilot sites will share experiences with colleagues in other neighborhoods. Information about the COZIN will be shared through newsletters of project partners, the information channels of the library and schools, and through other media.

At a national level, we will share information with national partner audiences with whom we have strong connections, including the Pew Charitable Trusts; the Urban Institute's National Neighborhood Indicators Project; the HUD Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities; and the Community Development Training Institute, a national audience of community development officials. We will provide easy access to information about the project through the COZIN Web site, which will be a link on various Web sites of partners around the country to afford opportunities for other community-building initiatives to access our work.